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Cantor's water snake at Sungei Buloh Wetland Reserve

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Subject: Cantor's water snake, *Cantoria violacea* (Reptilia: Squamata: Homalopsidae).

Subject identified by: Khairi Kamisan.

Location, date and time: Singapore Island, Sungei Buloh Wetland Reserve (SBWR); 8 July 2020; 0820 hrs.

Habitat: Estuarine shore. Mangrove habitat during morning rising tide.

Observer: Spencer Yau Jia Ming.

Fig 1. Dead Cantor's water snake in-situ on the main walking trail. Photograph by Spencer Yau Jia Ming

Observation: A deceased example was discovered on the main walking trail with slough attached (Fig. 1). It was on elevated dry land about three metres away from the nearest water. The specimen was collected and measured to be about 95 cm long (Fig. 3). The sloughed skin was removed and the snake was rinsed with running water (Fig. 2-4). Although stiff kinks were noted on the hind part of the body (Fig. 4.), the carcass had no external wounds, no rigor mortis and did not smell of decay. These imply that the snake had died very recently, perhaps less than an hour before discovery. It was preserved in 96% ethanol and stored in a freezer at the SBWR staff office.

Fig 2. Lateral view of the specimen's head and anterior body cleaned of slough. Photograph by Spencer Yau Jia Ming

Remarks: *Cantoria violacea* is a rarely seen mangrove-dwelling snake that is considered 'critically endangered' in Singapore (Davison et al., 2008). While it has been recorded at SBWR (Baker & Lim, 2008), there had been no sighting of this species there for over a decade (personal communication with SBWR management team).

The cause of the featured specimen's death is unknown. It seems unusual for an aquatic snake to be found on dry land some distance from the water, with slough stuck to its body. Water snakes in general lose their sloughs underwater (Lillywhite, 1989). It is possible that an unknown creature had killed the snake in the water nearby and then abandoned it on the trail. The apparent absence of external injury may point to the possibility of the snake dying in the middle of its overland trip to another body of water.

The dietary habits of *Cantoria violacea* are poorly known, but gut content analysis by Voris & Murphy (2002) revealed that its preys on snapping shrimps of the genus *Alpheus*. More recently this snake has been observed to eat crabs as well, ripping these into smaller chunks prior to consumption (Ghodke et al., 2018).

Having the featured specimen preserved may give us an insight to how it might have died, and what it may have eaten.

Fig 3. Ventral view of the specimen without slough. Numbered Markings on the ruler at the bottom edge are in cm.

Fig 4. Dorsal view of the specimen cleaned of slough. Note the kinks on the second half of the body.

Photographs by Spencer J. M. Yau

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